

Summary: In his speech in Prague, Czech Republic, on April 5, 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama outlined his ultimate goal of a world without nuclear weapons. Obama confirmed the U.S. availability for dialogue with Iran and that he is flexible on missile defense in Europe, which the United States would need to pursue only if the Iranian nuclear threat materialized. He also delivered a strong message (“violations must be punished”) to North Korea after it had just renewed testing of a long range missile.

These proposals stand in almost complete reversal to the Bush administration’s stance on nuclear issues. Europeans have in general been frustrated by the lack of interest in arms control shown by the previous administration. The important fact in the aftermath of the Prague speech is that the U.S. president has presented U.S. allies with a number of specific measures that serve both sides’ interests and together provide a more viable view of the balance to be achieved between nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament. They should concentrate their energy on making this agenda happen and transforming it into viable policy.

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America’s New Nuclear Disarmament Policy and the Transatlantic Relationship

by Gilles Andréani¹

Introduction

In his speech in Prague, Czech Republic, on April 5, 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama outlined his ultimate goal of a world without nuclear weapons. However, Obama conceded that it could probably not be reached in his lifetime and proposed a number of concrete steps to move nuclear disarmament forward and curb the proliferation of nuclear weapons. These include:

- The negotiation this year of a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) agreement with Russia providing for deep reductions in Russian and U.S. arsenals, which would set the stage for the inclusion of other nuclear weapon states into this process.
- The ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the negotiation of a verifiable Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT).
- A new international effort to secure vulnerable nuclear material, which will include a Global Summit on Nuclear Security hosted by United States next year.

- The institutionalization of two non-proliferation cooperative schemes of the Bush era: the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and the global initiative to combat nuclear terrorism.
- Measures to strengthen controls over the civilian nuclear fuel cycle and the creation of a fuel bank to the benefit of non-nuclear weapons states.

In addition, Obama confirmed the U.S. availability for dialogue with Iran and indicated that he was flexible on missile defense in Europe, which the United States would need to pursue only if the Iranian nuclear threat materialized. He also delivered a strong message (“violations must be punished”) to North Korea after it had just renewed testing of a long range missile.

These proposals stand in almost complete reversal to the Bush administration’s stance on nuclear issues. The Bush administration opposed the CTBT, which the Republicans had defeated in the U.S. Senate in 1998, showed little confidence in the possibility of an effective FMCT, and had no interest in further negotiated cuts in offensive nuclear weapons. As for proliferation, the Bush administration devised measures to deny the illegal

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transfer of materials such as the PSI, but hardly sought to devise political and economic incentives to the benefit of non-nuclear weapons states. It would not directly engage Iran on nuclear and other issues, although it was effectively supportive of, and indirectly involved in, Europe's dialogue with Iran. With North Korea, by contrast, it opted for a policy of negotiation, which resulted in the 2007 Six-Party agreement.

In general, Europeans had been frustrated by the lack of interest in arms control shown by the previous administration. The impact of Obama's speech on April 5 has been mostly positive throughout Europe. Its lasting impact on transatlantic relations must be analyzed according to three different elements present within the speech itself: 1) the new U.S. attitude toward nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation; 2) the various measures announced in the speech; and 3) the prospect of a world without nuclear weapons.

A more "European" attitude toward disarmament and nonproliferation

The most important and interesting point of the speech is the new U.S. attitude regarding nonproliferation and disarmament that it signaled. This change will have a positive impact in Europe. We cannot stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons, a clear and present security threat to the United States and the West, without reinforcing the nonproliferation regime. This regime is increasingly vulnerable and risks collapsing altogether. This requires the nuclear weapons states and the Western alliance in general to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in their security and take their nuclear disarmament obligations seriously.

This attitude is "multilateral" as opposed to "unilateral." The Bush administration tended to reserve for the United States the greatest freedom to act—including preventive action—and the widest possible range of military options. They did this with little regard to what would happen if others in the world claimed the same freedom and the same options, a stance that upset many in Europe.

It should be obvious that in an increasingly democratic world, where equality of rights is paramount, nuclear nonproliferation can only be sustained if it entails a measure of reciprocity between nuclear and non-nuclear weapons states. Nuclear disarmament in a broad sense, which includes de-emphasizing deterrence in security policies, reducing the level of existing stockpiles, and securing the entry into force of the CTBT, is necessary to sustain in the long run the legitimacy of the NPT bargain.

For the Atlantic alliance, which remains committed to nuclear deterrence as a component of its solidarity and security, is there room to further reduce the role of nuclear weapons in its strategy, as the Obama speech calls for? Dual capable aircrafts that comprise the only remaining U.S. nuclear weapons specifically dedicated to a NATO role have long been obvious candidates for such a symbolic move. The challenge will be, if and when the allies concerned decide to eliminate these weapons, to signal that this does not terminate the identity of NATO as a nuclear alliance, even as NATO further makes it known that it only considers nuclear weapons as a last resort option.

New policy, old measures

In reality, most of the measures announced by Obama on April 5 are not new. They are a combination of disarmament and nonproliferation options that have been on the table for a long time. They all have enjoyed the support in one form or another of the Europeans. They will, in particular, welcome that the Obama administration has committed itself to securing the ratification of the CTBT and supports the case for a verifiable FMCT.

Only three elements stand out as relatively new: 1) the proposal of an international fuel bank to secure access of non-nuclear weapons states to fissile material; 2) the proposition to hold a world summit on nuclear security in the United States next year; and 3) Obama's indication that the new START treaty with Russia be negotiated this year. "This will set the stage for further cuts, and we will seek to include all nuclear weapons states in this endeavour," Obama said.

Of these elements, the most important from a transatlantic standpoint is the latter: This is the first time that the United States has called upon third country nuclear states to be included in the arms control process at a specific point. France and the United Kingdom will probably try to combine three elements in response. First, they deem to have made their contribution by unilaterally bringing down their capacities to what they regard as close to a minimum deterrent posture. Second, they will not want to directly challenge the new U.S. attitude, which largely coincides with their own view of the current state of the nonproliferation challenge. And last, it would be foolish for them to commit themselves to participating in nuclear disarmament upon completion of the next START agreement, without knowing if it would provide for the deep reductions and the improved strategic stability of which their participation would be unwarranted from their standpoint. As a result, they are likely to issue positive-sounding signals, but reserve their final answer depending on the actual content of the promised

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START agreement. China will probably not react much differently; it will also try to secure guarantees that U.S. missile defense will not challenge their deterrent capability.

This leaves open the response of the three other unacknowledged nuclear weapon states: India, Pakistan, and Israel. Will the United States seek to include them at the same time as China, France, and the United Kingdom? Will it resuscitate the framework of a Weapons of Mass Destruction free-zone in the Middle East, which was conceived to address the Israeli issue? These are but a few of the daunting questions that the extension of a meaningful disarmament process beyond the United States and Russia will entail.

A world without nuclear weapons: Why again?

It is hardly new for America to endorse the vision of a nuclear-free world. Ronald Reagan nearly agreed with Mikhail Gorbachev to eliminate ballistic missiles in October 1986 in Reykjavik. Most recently, Henry Kissinger, George Schultz, William Perry, and Samuel Nunn, along with a number of experts and academics, have argued that the United States should actually make the elimination of nuclear weapons a central aim of its security strategy. That is a goal that Obama had campaigned on.

The elimination of nuclear weapons conforms with American idealism. It is also a fact that nuclear weapons are the only weapons that pose a serious military challenge to the United States given its overwhelming superiority and quasi-invulnerability in every other segment of military force. Providing a realist side to seeking to eliminate nuclear weapons from an American standpoint, Ivo Daalder, who is another recent convert to the cause of a nuclear-free world, said, "During the Cold War (...) we confronted a superior conventional foe in Europe and elsewhere that we sought to deter by threatening nuclear escalation. Today, our overwhelming conventional forces can defeat any nation, anywhere on earth."²

Will Obama's endorsement of the elimination of nuclear weapons elicit the same dismay in Europe as the Reykjavik Summit did 20 years ago? On the one hand, Europe depends much less on nuclear deterrence for its security than in the 1980s. The combined dangers of proliferation and loose nukes are very apparent. Proclaiming the goal of the elimination of nuclear weapons may help energize the nuclear disarmament process. As a result, Europeans have generally spoken favorably of the Prague speech.

On the other hand, the NPT does not unconditionally commit nuclear weapons states to eliminate such weapons, but rather to "negotiate in good faith" to achieve nuclear disarmament along with "general and complete disarmament." This reflects the fact that nuclear weapons not only deter other countries' nukes, but serve a wider security role in the overall balance of forces. Simplifying the NPT bargain may give arguments to proliferators who already criticize the treaty as providing for nothing less than "nuclear apartheid." In addition, it is always hazardous to set policy objectives that are manifestly unrealistic. One will neither abolish, nor disinvent, nuclear weapons except in a world politically so deeply transformed as to be unrecognizable from our own.

Some Europeans have welcomed Obama's visionary and optimistic outlook, which his campaign slogan encompassed: "yes we can." Others have been impressed by his steady, statesman-like, and unprejudiced approach to problems. The former will be seduced by his vision of a world without nuclear weapons; the latter wary that it loaded an otherwise thoughtful, but already daunting, nuclear agenda, with a messianic and self-serving goal that may confuse and complicate things.

Be that as it may, the important fact in the aftermath of the Prague speech is that the U.S. president has presented U.S. allies with a number of specific measures which serve both sides' interests and together provide a more viable view of the balance to be achieved between nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament. They should concentrate their energy on making this agenda happen and transforming it into viable policy. This will be difficult. Less than a month after the Prague speech, North Korea answered by walking away from the Six-Party Talks and extracting plutonium again from spent fuel. U.S. openings have not been answered by Iran. The first round of U.S.-Russia nuclear talks has been reported to be positive, but the agreement to be achieved this year remains yet unspecified.

Whether a nuclear-free world is feasible or desirable will remain irrelevant until these, and quite a few other problems, are solved. The United States and Europe should be inspired to focus on these real problems, on which they happen to agree for the most part, than to discuss ultimate goals they are not likely to agree upon, much less make happen.

²Ivo Daalder and John Holum. "A nuclear-free world." *Boston Globe*, October 5, 2007.